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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 005824

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [FR](#) [EUN](#) [GE](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PHUM](#) [XF](#)
SUBJECT: CHIRAC/MERKEL FOCUS ON LEBANON, MIDDLE EAST;
EVOLVING FRENCH VIEWS ON TURKEY?

REF: PARIS 5811

Classified By: PolMC Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 (B & D).

11. (C) Summary: The August 25 informal Blaesheim meeting between President Chirac and German chancellor Merkel and their foreign ministers focused on Lebanon and the situation in the Middle East. Merkel publicly supported France's position on lifting the Israeli air/sea blockade of Lebanon, with Germany pledged to coordinate closely with France on contacts with Syria. Further discussion focused on Iran (need to maintain Western unity), the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (support the Quartet), and the DRC (EU operation judged a success). On the EU, both sides rehearsed familiar positions on the constitutional treaty and enlargement; of note, however, the Germans profess to perceive a softening of French attitudes toward Turkey as a result of its role in Lebanon/UNIFIL (a shift which was not confirmed by our French contact). Bilateral discussions focused on the October joint ministerial meeting, where integration of minorities is to be on the agenda. German FM Steinmeier participated August 28 in France's annual conference of ambassadors, with FM Douste-Blazy planning to reciprocate the following week in Berlin. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Deputy PolCouns met August 29 with German PolCouns Gerhard Almer and French MFA DAS-equivalent for Central Europe Christophe Leonzi for a briefing on the August 25 "Blaesheim-format" summit meeting between President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, which also included the participation of foreign ministers Douste-Blazy and Steinmeier. Steinmeier also attended the August 28 session of the annual conclave of French ambassadors where Chirac spoke (reftel) and delivered remarks that same evening. Leonzi indicated that Douste-Blazy would reciprocate by attending the German ambassadors' conference the following week in Berlin. In a symbolic gesture, Chirac and Merkel also laid a wreath at the foot of a statue of Charles de Gaulle to celebrate the 62th anniversary of the liberation of Paris.

13. (C) Almer reviewed the history of the Blaesheim format as prelude to the briefing, recalling that "a new beginning" was needed after the December 2000 EU summit talks in Nice under the French presidency, where Chirac had pursued French national interests to the detriment of EU consensus, ridding roughshod over German desiderata in particular. He underlined the meetings' emphasis on holding informal exchanges on topical issues, during which each country was expected "put its cards on the table" on sensitive issues, with the aim of allowing them to take their respective interests into subsequent account when formulating policies. The meetings are roughly timed, he said, to precede European Council meetings. Almer recounted that Merkel had agreed early to continue the meetings begun under her predecessor, while highlighting her more "rational" (what the Germans call

"scientific") approach to the relationship, in which personal sentiments were not a significant factor.

Lebanon

14. (C) Almer said discussions of Lebanon/UNIFIL were less extensive than otherwise might have been the case, given Chirac's August 24 television address announcing France's decision to contribute another 1600 soldiers to UNIFIL (beyond the 200 offered earlier, and in addition to the 200 already in UNIFIL). In response to a question about Merkel's public support for France's demand that Israel lift its air and sea blockade of Lebanon, Almer responded that Merkel had taken this decision before her arrival in Paris and pointed out that Merkel, rather than Chirac, had raised this issue first during their joint press conference on August 25. (Leonzi did not appear fully informed on this point.) As Steinmeier also made clear in his August 28 remarks to French ambassadors, Germany had offered to station ships offshore to monitor arms smuggling as an alternative to the Israeli blockade, but lifting the blockade was a precondition for their deployment.

Syria

15. (C) Asked about the differing positions of Paris and Berlin on engaging Syria, Almer responded that Steinmeier had consulted with Douste-Blazy prior to his earlier, planned visit. (Note: Steinmeier subsequently broke off the visit in response to Syrian President Asad's aggressive public remarks.) Almer claimed that Douste-Blazy was comfortable with German attempts to engage Syria, notwithstanding France's current policy of no dialogue. Steinmeier discussed German intentions again August 28 with Douste-Blazy,

PARIS 00005824 002 OF 003

according to Almer, who said both sides had agreed that German efforts should continue so long as this was on the basis of a common position on expectations. (Leonzi was not as specific, referring only to close coordination.) Germany, said Almer, continued to believe that Syria retained a key role in the region. Leonzi added that France wanted Syria to play a constructive role in the region but did not at this time have confidence that it was prepared to do so.

Iran

16. (C) Almer did not elaborate on the discussion of Iran, except to note Germany's analysis that the Iranians were attempting to drive wedges not only between the Europeans and the U.S., or between Europe/U.S. and Russia/China, but also among European countries. It was for this reason, he said, that Tehran was not prepared to accept a visit by Solana. Leonzi stressed the importance of maintaining Western unity on Iran.

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

17. (C) Almer said that France and Germany had agreed that the Lebanon situation could only be resolved within the framework of a political process that included dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Asked whether France and Germany were considering new initiatives, he affirmed that the current focus was on a return to the Road Map and an early meeting of the Quartet. Separately, he expressed some concern about the stability of the Olmert government. Leonzi had no comments.

Congo

18. (C) Almer said that Germany, while concerned about recent unrest in the DRC following the elections, nonetheless judged that the EU forces had played a useful role in keeping the peace. Leonzi indicated that France played a key advisory role with Germany and noted the challenge for Berlin of managing public opinion.

Europe

¶9. (C) Asked about the EU-related discussions, Almer noted that Germany accepted France's need to refer to the EU's absorptive capacity in considering future enlargements, although Berlin did not understand how this was to be operationalized, since the criterion did not lend itself to quantification. Germany, he said, did not want France to take this new criterion too far, although Berlin understood that Paris, for domestic consumption, needed reasons to be able to claim that enlargement had been slowed down. He said there was no significant discussion of European Union institutions, although Chirac reiterated the need to do the most possible within the framework of existing treaties. Steinmeier, Almer said, stressed the importance of resurrecting the substance of the failed constitutional treaty but minus the word "constitution" and much of the symbolism.

Turkey

¶10. (C) Almer said that Turkey's announced intention to contribute forces to UNIFIL was leading to a greater appreciation by France's of Turkey's strategic importance. Steinmeier stated in his remarks to French ambassadors that it was the EU's duty to make the Balkans part of Europe, and for Turkey "to be close" to Europe. When Deputy PolCouns responded that this sounded like less than a ringing endorsement, Almer disagreed. Germany and France had earlier been focused on what steps the EU would take, including breaking off accession negotiations with Turkey, if, as expected, Turkey did not implement by December the Ankara Protocol on extending the EU-Turkey customs union to new member states. Earlier, he stated, many of his French interlocutors would have responded with "all the better." After the August 25 discussions, however, Germany had the impression that "something had changed" and that France would now act more cautiously in view of Turkey's potential role in Lebanon and influence in the region. At a minimum, he speculated, France now would not want to close the door completely on eventual accession. Leonzi offered no encouragement that the French position had changed, underlining only that pressure would mount on Turkey to implement in full the Ankara Protocol on extending the customs union.

Bilateral Issues

PARIS 00005824 003 OF 003

¶11. (C) Almert said the upcoming October joint ministerial meeting would focus on integration and equality and would include a meeting in Paris between the German and French minister-delegates for minority issues (Minister-Delegate for Equal Opportunity Azouz Begag on the French side). There would also be an economic piece, although it was not yet decided whether the focus would be on innovation, energy, or some other issue.

¶12. (C) Asked if there were any plans to mark the end of Chirac's term and his contribution to Franco-German friendship, Almer said this was not the case. Citing Schroeder's "personal" visit to Paris, with spouse, before his departure, he said Germany would prefer to keep it low-key. He had no information on possible French plans.

¶13. (C) Asked about German contacts with leading French presidential contenders, Almer said Merkel already knew Sarkozy in his capacity as President of a center-right sister party. She would, however, await the designation of the Socialist party's candidate before meeting with him or her.

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